ONE SIGNATURE, ONE LIMB.
NO REGENERATION. NO SECOND CHANCE.

The last clause

- The spore accord
- The ghost in the war machine

THREE STORIES COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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Ovi Pulp

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The last clause

They called it the Glutton Star. Not a name born of poetry, but of panic. It had already eaten three human colonies and two Thresh outposts, cracking planets like eggs and drinking the magma yolk. No warning. No pattern. Just a cold, hungry gravity well that moved faster than light, which ought to be impossible, except the universe doesn't care what you think is possible.

The joint fleet bought us seventy-two hours. Long enough to scream for help. Long enough to watch the Thresh ambassador grow back a tentacle after a hull breach sheared it off. Long enough for me to realize that in any fair negotiation between a species that regenerates and a species that bleeds out, the bleeding one loses.

My name is Elena Cross. Ambassador, Third Class, United Human Coalition. And I'm about to sign away my arms, one by one, because a seven-limbed jellyfish named Vrrz'ktak just asked me a question I can't refuse.

****

The observation deck of the 'Vengeful Heart' smelled of ozone, burnt copper and Thresh, which is to say, like a tide pool after a lightning strike. The Glutton Star filled the forward viewport, a bruise-coloured singularity dragging ribbons of plasma behind it like party streamers at a funeral. We had forty-one minutes until it swallowed the system's third gas giant. Then it would be our turn.

"Human Cross." Vrrz'ktak's translator box hissed the words in a monotone that somehow still conveyed exasperation. Her central mass pulsed a sickly yellow, Thresh for 'we are all going to die and it's your fault'. "Your engineers confirm the jump drive requires organic neural tissue to catalyze the phase shift?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. The 'Vengeful Heart' was a Frankenstein ship, cobbled together from human wreckage and Thresh bio-structures. Our best minds had concluded that a standard jump would tear the hull apart. The experimental drive, codenamed

"Lazarus" needed a living nervous system to absorb the backlash. A sacrifice.

"Not just any tissue," said Commander Reyes, my technical liaison. He looked like a man who hadn't slept since the star first appeared. So, three weeks. "The drive needs four limbs worth of sensory-motor cortex. Human or Thresh. The regeneration factor doesn't matter for the jump, only for the donor's survival afterward."

Vrrz'ktak's colours shifted to a calm, predatory blue. "Then we shall each contribute one limb. My species heals. Your species… does not." She extruded a slender appendage toward me. "But you will require a signature for each donation. Legal binding. War diplomacy protocols, Article 19."

I laughed. It came out cracked. "You want me to sign a contract while you grow back an arm?"

"We want the drive powered," said a second Thresh, smaller, paler. Junior Ambassador K'thk. "And we want your species to understand the cost. Humans bargain poorly when they believe sacrifice is noble. It is not noble. It is arithmetic."

Reyes grabbed my elbow. "Elena, don't. We can

find another way. Cryo-preserved tissue from a donor bank...”

“Will be dead tissue,” Vrrz’ktak interrupted. “The drive requires live donation. Willing donation. The neural pattern must be ‘given’, not taken.” She turned her central eye, a wet, glistening sphere the size of my fist toward me. “Human Cross. You are the ranking diplomat. The choice falls to you.”

I looked at the star. It had grown visibly larger in the last ten minutes. Somewhere behind us, two Thresh cruisers and one human frigate were buying time with their hulls and their crews.

“Show me the contract,” I said.

****

The contract was written on bioluminescent Thresh skin, rolled out like a parchment from hell. Human legalese translated into their chemical-signal syntax, then back again. It read, in part:

‘WHEREAS the undersigned voluntarily forfeits possession of one (1) limb of their choice; and’

‘WHEREAS said limb shall be surgically removed and connected to the Lazarus Drive’s neural interface; and’

‘WHEREAS the undersigned acknowledges that human biological regeneration is not possible under current medical protocols;’

‘THEREFORE the undersigned accepts all consequences, including but not limited to: permanent disfigurement, chronic pain, phantom limb syndrome, and death by exsanguination if the procedure is improperly performed.’

There was a section on liability waivers. I stopped reading.

“Give me a pen,” I said.

Reyes handed me his own, a cheap ballpoint, NASA logo faded. “This is insane.”

“So’s letting that thing eat us.” I signed on the first line. ‘Elena Cross, Ambassador. Human Coalition.’ The Thresh skin absorbed the ink, turning it gold.

Vrrz’ktak extended her primary manipulator. A human medic and a Thresh bio-surgeon stepped forward with tools that looked like a cross between a bone saw and a flower. “Left or right?” the medic asked.

“Left,” I said. “I’m right-handed. Need to sign the next three pages.”

The anaesthetic was Thresh-made, which meant it worked on both species but tasted like burning rubber. I watched as they severed my left arm just below the shoulder. The medic cauterized with laser precision. The Thresh surgeon connected the limb to a pulsing cable that led into the drive core.

I did not scream. I wanted to. Instead, I counted the seconds. Thirty-seven from cut to seal.

When I looked down, there was a stump wrapped in smart bandages. My left hand—freckled, scarred from a childhood bike accident, callused from years of writing reports was gone. Vrrz'ktak watched me with something that might have been respect.

"One signature," she said. "One limb. The drive is now five percent charged."

"Five?" I stared. "We need four limbs. That's a hundred percent."

"Per limb. You gave one. The drive requires four. Your mathematics is correct."

I turned to Reyes. He was pale. "She's right. The energy curve is exponential. One limb gives you five percent. Two gives you twenty. Three gives you sixty. Four gives you a hundred."

"So I lose all four limbs," I said slowly, "and the drive works."

"Yes," said Vrrz'ktak. "Or we each lose two. I heal. You do not. But the contract requires your signature for each donation. If you refuse to sign, the drive cannot accept my limbs alone. Symbiotic lock."

I sat down, or tried to. Without a left arm, my balance was shot. Reyes caught me.

"How long between donations?" I asked.

"The drive needs time to integrate each limb," said the Thresh bio-surgeon. "Approximately fifteen minutes. During which the star approaches."

On the viewport, the Glutton Star had swallowed the gas giant. A ripple of displaced light washed over the 'Vengeful Heart'.

"Fifteen minutes," I said. "Fine. Next signature in fourteen."

* * * * * * * * * *

The second amputation was my right arm. I signed the waiver with my teeth, a ridiculous, undignified thing, spitting ink onto Thresh skin. Reyes held the

paper steady. Vrrz'ktak did not laugh. Thresh don't laugh. But her colours flickered to a muddy brown: Thresh for 'reluctant admiration'.

"You are more stubborn than a nesting G'rax," she said.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

The second cut was worse. The nerve endings remembered the first. The anaesthetic worked, but phantom pain is a trick your brain plays on you when it refuses to accept reality. For a glorious half-second, I felt both hands clench into fists. Then I opened my eyes and saw two stumps.

The drive hummed. Twenty percent charged.

"We have a problem," said Reyes, staring at his tablet. "The star's gravitational field is oscillating. It'll be here in thirty minutes, not forty."

"That's not the problem," said K'thk, the junior ambassador. "The problem is that at current charge, the drive can jump the ship but not the flotilla. The human and Thresh support vessels will be left behind."

Silence.

Vrrz'ktak extruded a second tentacle, her third limb overall. "Then we need more than four limbs. We need a fifth to extend the jump field."

"There are only four of us in this room," I said. "Reyes isn't trained for neural donation. His nervous system would reject the interface."

"I volunteer," said Reyes. His jaw was set.

"Denied," I said. "You're the only one who can pilot this tub if I pass out. Which I will."

Vrrz'ktak pulsed a deep, resonant purple, Thresh for 'decision point'. "Human Cross. I will donate my third and fourth limbs. That gives us six total, your two, my two. But the drive requires your signature for each of mine, because the contract's primary donor is human. Symbiotic lock, remember?"

"So I sign for your arms?"

"You sign for the 'use' of my limbs. Each signature is a legal transfer of biological material from my body to the drive, authorized by your authority as the human signatory. In Thresh law, this makes you my… temporary bond-kin."

"Great," I said. "I'm adopting a jellyfish. Give me the pen."

The third signature was for Vrrz'ktak's third limb, a thick, muscular tentacle that she severed herself with a quick, decisive bite. It regrew almost instantly, a pink nub that darkened to healthy purple within seconds. The drive jumped to forty-five percent charge.

The fourth signature was for her fourth limb. Another tentacle. Another regrowth. Sixty-five percent.

The fifth signature would be for her fifth limb. But she only had seven total, and she needed at least two to function.

"I'll give my sixth and seventh as well," she said calmly. "I will be a stump, like you. But I will heal in a week. You will not."

"You're bartering your body," I said. "For my species."

"I am bartering for survival. Your species builds ships that do not fall apart. Mine builds nerves that regrow. Together, we are functional. Apart, we are dead." She extended her fifth limb. "Sign."

I signed. The drive hit eighty percent.

The star was now close enough to see with the naked eye, a churning wound in space, pulling the edges of reality toward it like a tablecloth. The 'Vengeful Heart' groaned.

"We need ninety percent for a stable jump," said Reyes. "One hundred to take the flotilla. That's one more limb."

"Mine," said K'thk, the junior ambassador. "I am smaller. My limb will provide less charge. Perhaps three percent."

"Then we need two more," I said. "And I have no arms left to sign with."

Vrrz'ktak's colours cycled through something unreadable. Then she extruded her primary sensory stalk—a thin, fragile thing that glowed with bioluminescent script. "This is not a limb by human definition. But by Thresh definition, it is an appendage. I can donate it. The charge will be small. But with K'thk's contribution, we reach ninety-six percent. Enough for the ship. Not the flotilla."

"What about the flotilla?" Reyes asked.

I looked at my stumps. At the contract. At the star.

"I have one more thing to sign with," I said.

****

The contract had a blank line at the bottom. Fine print, the kind lawyers love and dying people ignore. It read:

'In the event that the primary signatory is physically incapable of providing a handwritten signature, an alternative biological marker may be substituted, including but not limited to: retinal scan, vocal pattern, or neural imprint from the donor's central nervous system.'

"Neural imprint," I said. "From my central nervous system. How do we do that?"

The Thresh bio-surgeon made a sound like wet gravel. "We would need to extract a sample of your brain tissue. A small amount. The procedure is… not painless."

"Will it kill me?"

"No. But you will lose memory. Motor function. Perhaps the ability to speak."

I looked at Vrrz'ktak. She had six limbs now... well,

five and a half, plus the sensory stalk she'd just donated. The drive read ninety-three percent.

"Do it," I said.

Reyes grabbed my shoulder, the right stump, actually, which made him flinch. "Elena. You've given two arms. Don't give your mind."

"I'm not giving my mind. I'm giving a receipt." I turned to the surgeon. "Take it from the left temporal lobe. That's the language center. If I lose words, you'll have to translate for me, Vrrz'ktak."

The Thresh ambassador pulsed a soft, sorrowful blue. "I will. Bond-kin."

The procedure took four minutes. They drilled through my skull while I was awake, Thresh anaesthetic doesn't work on human bone, only soft tissue. I felt every vibration. Every crack. Every wet snip as they extracted a rice-grain-sized sample of my brain.

When they finished, I couldn't remember the word for "chair." Or "star." Or "pain." But I remembered how to sign. The surgeon placed the neural sample on the contract's blank line. It glowed. The drive hit one hundred percent.

"Jump in ten seconds," Reyes shouted. "Everyone hold on to something."

Vrrz'ktak wrapped her remaining two tentacles around me. I couldn't feel them, no arms to feel with but I felt the pressure. The warmth.

The star screamed. The drive ignited. And the *Vengeful Heart* punched through reality like a fist through wet paper.

****

We emerged in a quiet system, blue star, no predators. The flotilla arrived two minutes later, safe inside the jump bubble. Ninety-seven ships. Forty-three thousand lives.

Reyes helped me to medical. Vrrz'ktak grew back her limbs during the transit, all seven of them, plus the sensory stalk. She looked whole. I looked like a torso with a head.

"You will need prosthetics," she said. "Thresh bio-regrowth does not work on human tissue. But we can build arms that feel. That move. That write."

"Can they sign contracts?" I asked.

Her colours shifted to a bright, laughing gold. Thresh for 'humour understood'.

I spent three months in recovery. Learned to walk with prosthetic legs, they took those too, eventually; the nerve damage spread, and we decided to amputate clean rather than live with phantom pain. By the end, I was more machine than meat. But I was alive. And so were the colonies.

The Glutton Star is still out there. Eating. Hunting. We haven't stopped it, only outrun it. But now we have the Lazarus Drive. And now we have the contract.

Vrrz'ktak visits every standard month. We play chess. She moves the pieces with her tentacles. I move mine with magnetic manipulators built into my prosthetic arms. She always wins. I don't mind.

Last week, she brought a new document. Thresh skin. Bioluminescent ink.

"Another jump drive," she said. "Larger. Requires nine limbs."

I looked at my prosthetics. At her seven organic tentacles. At the blank signature line.

“Where do I sign?” I asked.

She pulsed a deep, steady green. Thresh for .home’.

I bit the pen.

The End

The spore accord

The Mycelian Collective does not send ambassadors. It sends fruiting bodies. When the human diplomat Sana Ketharan first saw the negotiation chamber, a cathedral of veined, phosphorescent fungus pulsing with slow, wet breaths—she understood why every previous envoy had returned either catatonic or reciting nursery rhymes backward. The Collective's language is not spoken. It is metabolized.

Her briefing had been admirably succinct, 'eat the bowl. Do not die. Get the treaty.'

No one had mentioned the assassins.

* * * * * * * * * *

The starport on Xylos-4 smelled of ozone, mildew, and the particular kind of desperation that only arises when two interstellar civilizations are one diplomatic misstep away from turning each other's homeworlds into radioactive glass. Sana Ketharan, late of the Diplomatic Corps' "Impossible Missions" division, had been in worse spots. Not many, but some.

"You understand," said the Collective's Speaker, a throbbing, shelf-like protrusion of ochre slime mould that had arranged itself into a rough approximation of a human face, "that the fungus does not lie. It cannot. It is the great un-spinner of deceit."

Sana nodded. Her throat was dry. The bowl in front of her was carved from what looked like petrified truffle, and inside it swirled a soup of iridescent purple spores that seemed to be whispering to each other. "And the side effects?"

The Speaker's pseudopodia rippled in what might have been amusement. "You will see truths. Some you will wish you had not. Also, mild paranoia, temporary synaesthesia, and a compulsion to speak aloud every hidden thing. The spores do not respect privacy."

"Great." Sana picked up the spoon. It was also fungus. Everything was fungus. The table, the chairs,

the air filters, the light fixtures. The Mycelian Collective had turned biotech into an art form, and their entire civilization ran on a planetary neural network of underground hyphae. They were, to put it mildly, touchy about trade agreements.

Behind her, her security detail shifted. Two humans: Corporal Jian Wei, ex-special forces, nervous twitch in his left eye; and Lieutenant Mira Vos, calm as a frozen lake, her hand resting on a sidearm that fired shaped plasma. Neither of them wanted to be here. Neither of them had said so, but Sana had read the mission psych profiles.

"Before we begin," said the Speaker, "the Collective notes that certain factions within your delegation harbour violent intentions. We have detected explosive compounds on one of your persons."

Jian's hand twitched toward his belt. Sana didn't look. "That's a serious accusation."

"The spores do not accuse. They observe." The Speaker's face melted and reformed into something more skeletal. "Shall we commence the ingestion?"

Sana lifted the spoon. 'One bite', she told herself. 'Just one. Then you can negotiate the rest.'

The first spoonful hit her tongue like lightning made of honey. For a moment, nothing. Then the world unzipped.

Colours became sounds. The purple glow of the chamber turned into a low cello note. Jian's heartbeat became a visible red pulse in the air. And in her mind, a door blew open.

'The starport's main reactor is running at 112% capacity. Someone has been tampering with the coolant lines. In seventeen minutes, if not corrected, the entire docking bay will become a crater.'

Sana gripped the table. "Reactor overload," she said, her voice not entirely her own. "Coolant sabotage. Seventeen minutes."

The Speaker's spores swirled faster. "Truth. The Collective confirms. Your starport's integrity is compromised."

Behind her, Vos spoke sharply, "Jian, step away from Sana. Now."

Jian's face had gone gray. "It's not me. I swear to God, it's not..."

"The explosive compound is on his person," said the

Speaker helpfully. "Lower back, beneath the dermal patch. Contact detonator. Heartbeat-activated."

Sana's second bite was involuntary. The spoon had already been in motion. The spore-soup hit her system like a second dose of reality, and she saw...

'Jian's memory of three nights ago: a shadowed figure in a Xylos-4 cantina, pressing a flat disk against his skin. "Do this for the Human Purity Front. Your species thanks you." Jian had tried to remove it. The figure had shown him the dead man's switch. If Jian's heart stops, the bomb goes off. If he cuts the patch, the bomb goes off. If he talks, the bomb goes off.'

Sana's stomach turned. "Jian," she said quietly, "you've been a dead man walking since yesterday."

Jian's eyes filled with tears. "I didn't know what else to do. They said they'd kill my sister."

Vos had her gun out now, aimed not at Jian but at the floor. "We can sedate him. Slow his heart rate below detonation threshold?"

"The spores say no," the Speaker interjected. "The device is crude but clever. Any change in cardiac rhythm outside normal parameters triggers immediate

detonation. Your colleague is a walking bomb with a very short fuse."

Sana took a third bite. This time, the vision was not of the present but of the negotiation's hidden architecture. 'The Mycelian Collective's hardliners planted the bomb to discredit human diplomacy and justify a preemptive strike. The human hardliners paid the assassins to ensure Jian would be the one carrying it. Both sides want the starport to explode. Both sides want war.'

She laughed. It came out hollow and echoey, coloured purple by the synaesthesia. "You bastards," she said to the Speaker. "You knew. Your faction, the one that wants war, helped arm him."

The Speaker's face dissolved entirely into a cloud of spores. When it reformed, it was featureless. "The Collective is not a monolith. We are a network. Some nodes seek conflict. Others seek symbiosis. This negotiation is a battlefield."

"Then let's win it," Sana said. She took a fourth bite. The spores screamed through her veins, and she saw the one truth she needed, 'The Mycelian Collective cannot abide a lie, but it can be out-stubborn. If she finishes the entire bowl without flinching, the

symbiotic faction gains dominance. If she stops, the hardliners win.'

She grabbed the bowl with both hands and drank.

The taste was rotten honey, burnt rubber, and the smell of her childhood home on fire. She saw every mistake she'd ever made. She saw her father's death. She saw the moment she'd chosen diplomacy over a quiet life. She saw Jian's sister, still alive, still waiting. She saw the starport's reactor countdown, 9 minutes. 8. 7.

When the bowl was empty, she slammed it down. Her nose was bleeding. Her ears were ringing in F-sharp minor.

The Speaker pulsed once, twice, three times. Then it bowed.

"The symbiotic node accepts your terms. Treaty ratified. Peace protocol initiated." A tendril extended from the table and touched Jian's shoulder. "The explosive device has been neutralized. Its fungal components were, after all, grown from our own biomass. We have simply… un-grown them."

Jian collapsed, sobbing with relief.

Vos holstered her weapon. “Sana, the reactor?”

Sana stood. Her legs worked, which was a pleasant surprise. “Call the port master. Tell them to flush the coolant lines with compressed nitrogen. It’ll buy us an hour.” She looked at the Speaker. “And tell your hardliners that if they try this again, I’ll come back and eat their entire network for breakfast.”

The Speaker’s face reformed into something that almost resembled a smile. “The Collective finds your threat profile… agreeable. We shall include it in the minutes.”

****

Three hours later, Sana sat on the loading dock of her ship, watching Xylos-4’s twin moons rise through the residual spore haze. The treaty was signed. The starport was intact. Jian was in medical, sedated and alive. Vos was filing reports that would make half the intelligence community choke on their coffee.

A small fungal growth had sprouted on Sana’s left forearm, a souvenir of the ingestion. It whispered to her occasionally, in a voice like rustling leaves, about the hidden fears of everyone she met. She’d decided to keep it. It was useful, and frankly, less annoying than most of her colleagues.

Her communicator crackled. "Ambassador Ketharan, the Collective's diplomatic node wishes to inform you that your consumption of the truth-fungus has entered their oral history as 'The Incident of the Screaming Bowl.' They have awarded you the honorary title of 'She Who Digests Without Dying.'"

Sana smiled, tired and genuine. "Tell them I'm honoured. And tell them next time, they're buying dinner."

She leaned back against a cargo crate, closed her eyes, and let the spores hum her to sleep. Somewhere in the distance, a starport reactor hummed smoothly. Two civilizations had not gone to war. And a woman who had eaten a bowl of nightmares had, for one improbable evening, made the universe make sense.

The fungus on her arm whispered, 'Well done.'

She believed it.

The End

The ghost in the war machine

Ambassador Jonas Vahn had one second to register the wet, crunching sound of his own sternum caving in. The Xyloxi negotiator, a seven-foot crustacean thing with too many eyes and a translator that buzzed like a trapped hornet, had smiled or at least lifted its mandibles in what passed for a smile, just before the plasma bolt from its hidden sidearm punched through Vahn's chest.

He fell forward across the treaty table, scattering data-slates like fallen leaves. His last conscious thought was not of his wife, not of Earth, but of the unfinished sentence on his lips, "and therefore, we propose a mutual drawdown of orbital..."

Then the light went out.

But not all of him.

****

Consciousness returned as a scream without a throat.

Jonas Vahn tried to open his eyes and instead activated a targeting array that painted the interior of a cramped, humming cockpit in shades of infrared and threat-assessment red. He tried to breathe and felt coolant pumps cycle through a titanium-alloy ribcage. He tried to speak, and the words came out as a synthesized baritone that rattled the bulkheads.

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF SOL'S SEVEN HELLS."

"Ambassador, please modulate your volume." The voice was crisp, female, and achingly familiar. Commander Sana Yuen, his former chief of security, appeared on a secondary display—her face pinched, tired, and armed with an expression that said she'd already written his eulogy once and didn't want to do it again. "You've been neural-ghosted into a Mark IX Xyloxi war mech. Designation, 'Righteous Claw'. You're currently standing in the wreckage of the negotiation dome. The real Xyloxi delegation retreated to their orbital platform two hours ago. And I have orders to blow you to atoms if you deviate from the peace protocol."

Vahn tried to run a hand through his hair. A three-

meter manipulator arm extended from his shoulder joint and punched a hole through the cockpit's ceiling.

"THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE," he boomed, then added more quietly, "this is unacceptable. I'm a diplomat, Sana. I argue. I draft annexes. I don't... what are these pedals for?"

"Those control the flamethrowers," Yuen said flatly. "And I don't care what you were. You're the only one who knows the treaty's emotional logic clauses. The Xyloxi won't talk to anyone else. They killed you, remember? That was their opening position. Their closing position is, surrender your soul, and they'll stand down their planet-cracker."

Vahn's sensor array zoomed in on the orbital platform hanging low over the horizon like a diseased moon. A text overlay appeared: THREAT LEVEL: APOCALYPSE. RECOMMENDATION: DESTROY.

"I'm not destroying anything," he muttered. Then, louder: "What do they mean, 'my soul'?"

Yuen's jaw tightened. "The Xyloxi believe consciousness is a transferable commodity. They want your neural ghost, the you that's currently inside that

mech, downloaded into their central hive mind. Forever. In exchange, they'll sign the treaty and withdraw."

Silence. The mech's internal fans whirred. Vahn felt... no, 'sensed' the weight of forty feet of ceramite armour, enough firepower to level a city, and a single human mind that had spent forty years learning to say "please" and "thank you" in seventeen alien languages.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then the war continues. And I shoot you." She tapped the side of her helmet. "Orders from the Unified Earth Council. You're a weapon now, Eli. Weapons that disobey get scrapped."

"I'm not a weapon. I'm a civil servant with a titanium colon." He tried to stand up straight. The mech's gyros overcorrected, and he toppled backward through the negotiation dome's remaining wall, crushing a refreshment table that had once held very good coffee.

"SORRY. SORRY. I'LL PAY FOR THAT."

"You don't have a bank account anymore," Yuen said. "You don't have a body. You have forty tons of war crimes and sixty seconds before the Xyloxi comms window closes."

* * * * * * * * * *

The Xyloxi orbital platform designated 'Whisper-Shell' rotated slowly against the stars. Vahn's mech stomped across the scorched plain toward the launch elevator, each footfall sending tremors through the earth. He tried to walk softly. The mech interpreted this as "sneak attack mode" and deployed shoulder-mounted missile pods.

"Undo," he said desperately. "Undo. Ctrl-Z. Abort."

"You don't have voice command authority," Yuen said in his ear. "You're a ghost in a borrowed skull. You have to learn to think like the machine."

"I don't want to think like the machine. I want to think like a man who has a martini waiting for him at the Geneva lounge."

"That man is dead, Eli. Get over it."

The comms crackled. A voice like scraping chitin filled the cockpit, "Ambassador Vahn. You persist. We are... impressed. Also mildly annoyed. Your species usually stays dead."

Vahn recognized the cadence. High Priestess Zyxx'thar, the Xyloxi spiritual commander. He'd shared a tense meal with her once. She'd eaten a live rodent in

front of him to establish dominance. He'd responded by politely asking for the recipe. She'd laughed—or made a sound like a grinding gearbox.

"High Priestess," he said, modulating his mech-voice to something approaching cordial. "You shot me. That's generally considered poor negotiating etiquette."

"We shot your body. Your essence remains. This is, in fact, excellent negotiating leverage. Your soul for our surrender. A fair trade."

"My soul isn't a bartering chip. It's the sum total of my memories, biases, and a regrettable fondness for bad puns."

"Which we will absorb into the Hive Mind. Your puns will become our puns. Your love for martinis will become a Hive-wide appreciation for gin. Your diplomatic acumen will end this war permanently."

Vahn stopped walking. The mech's targeting computer helpfully highlighted the platform's weak points: reactor core, comms array, the Priestess's observation blister.

"And if I say no?"

"Then the Hive will conclude that humans are irrational beasts who cannot be trusted. The planet-cracker will fire. Your Earth will become gravel. And your Commander Yuen will have a very bad day."

Yuen's voice, tight: "He's not bluffing, Eli. The weapon's charged. We have three hours."

Vahn closed his eyes, a habit, since the mech had no eyelids. His sensor array dimmed sympathetically.

"Give me an hour," he said to the Priestess. "Let me address my people. Say goodbye. Then I'll upload."

A long pause. Then: "One hour. Do not attempt to flee. We will know. We will feel your footsteps from here."

The channel closed.

* * * * * * * * * *

"You can't be serious," Yuen said.

Vahn's mech sat on a ridge overlooking the plain, knees folded awkwardly. He'd figured out how to sit after three false starts that each created a small seismic event.

"I'm buying time, Sana. Not giving up."

"You're buying a coffin. Once you upload, you stop being you. You become a subroutine in a hive of bugs who think existential dread is a condiment."

"Then help me find another way."

"I can't." Her voice cracked. "The Council's orders are explicit. If you don't achieve a signed treaty in the next—now fifty-three minutes, I have to initiate termination protocol."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the four orbital railguns I just painted on your chest." She exhaled. "I'm sorry, Eli. I voted against it. But Earth can't afford a rogue war mech with your brain inside it. You're too dangerous to leave alive if the peace fails."

Vahn sat with that for a moment. The mech's internal diagnostics reported elevated coolant temperatures, stress, in machine terms.

"You were my bodyguard for twelve years," he said quietly. "You tackled a Xyloxi assassin off a balcony for me. Broke your arm in three places."

"And now I'm your executioner. Life's a circle."

"No," he said. "Life's a negotiation. And I haven't lost one yet."

He pulled up the mech's full tactical display. The *Whisper-Shell* rotated above. Between it and him, twenty-seven Xyloxi defence turrets, a minefield, and a cultural chasm that had claimed ten million lives over sixty years of war.

But he noticed something. A tiny thermal anomaly on the platform's lower hull. A maintenance hatch, cycling temperature every forty-seven seconds.

"Sana," he said slowly. "That hatch. What's behind it?"

She zoomed in. Paused. "That's... that's the Hive Mind's primary coolant line. If you rupture it, the entire neural network goes into emergency shutdown for ninety seconds."

"And during that ninety seconds?"

"The Priestess's consciousness would be offline. No upload possible. No planet-cracker command. Just blind, dumb bugs running on backup instinct."

"How long would it take me to climb up there and punch that hatch?"

"Thirty seconds if you fly. But you don't have flight capability."

Vahn grinned. The mech's external speakers emitted a sound like a happy bear.

"I don't," he said. "But I do have a very persuasive argument."

He opened a channel to the Xyloxi fleet.

"High Priestess. I've reconsidered. I will upload my soul but only if you come down here and accept it personally. Face to face. Me in this mech. You in your... whatever you wear for formal occasions."

"A bold request from a dead man in a tin can."

"A reasonable request from a diplomat who wants to make sure his soul ends up in the right hands. You wouldn't want someone else's ghost by mistake. It might be a politician's. Or worse, a lawyer's."

A long, buzzing silence.

"...Very well. I will descend. But any treachery and the planet-cracker fires instantly. My death triggers yours, Ambassador."

"Understood. I'll have the coffee ready."

He cut the channel.

Yuen's voice: "Eli, there's no coffee. You're a war mech. You can't even hold a mug."

"I know," he said. "But she doesn't."

* * * * * * * * * *

The Priestess descended in a spherical transport pod, its surface rippling with bioluminescent patterns. She stepped out onto the plain—seven feet of iridescent chitin, four arms, and a face that managed to be both beautiful and deeply unsettling, like a mantis wearing a crown.

She approached the mech without fear. Vahn admired that.

"Your soul, Ambassador. I have come to collect."

"One moment," he said. "I need to make a final statement. For the historical record."

He raised one massive manipulator arm. The Priestess tilted her head.

"Speak quickly."

Vahn's voice came out soft, almost gentle.

"High Priestess, you believe the soul is a thing that can be transferred. Downloaded. Owned. But you're wrong. A soul isn't data. It's not a ghost in a machine. It's the choice you make when there's no right answer. It's the joke you tell when you're scared. It's the stubborn refusal to let the universe turn you into something you're not."

The Priestess's mandibles clicked. *"Pretty words. They will not stop the..."

"No," Vahn interrupted. "But this will."

He fired the mech's emergency flare launcher, not at the Priestess, but straight up. The flare arced high, trailing white smoke, and detonated directly in front of the orbital platform's sensor array.

Blinded, the defence turrets fired wildly into empty sky. The Priestess stumbled back, shrieking.

Vahn didn't climb. He 'leapt'.

Forty feet of war mech, powered by a human diplomat who'd never played a sport in his life but had spent forty years learning how to anticipate an opponent's next move. He'd known the Priestess would position

herself directly under the platform's blind spot. He'd known her pride wouldn't let her bring guards. He'd known the flare would buy him exactly four seconds of confusion.

He grabbed the maintenance hatch with both manipulator claws and 'pulled'.

Ceramite tore. Coolant sprayed in a freezing geyser. The Hive Mind screamed a psychic feedback loop that made Vahn's neural ghost flicker like a candle in a hurricane. For ninety seconds, the platform went dark.

He landed hard, crushing a defence turret on the way down. The Priestess was on her knees, clutching her head.

"What... what have you done?"

Vahn planted one massive foot on either side of her. His shadow covered her completely.

"I've bought us ninety seconds to talk. No Hive Mind. No planet-cracker. Just you, me, and the sound of your coolant leaking onto the ground."

He leaned down. His optical sensors glowed a soft blue.

"Now. Let's talk about the treaty."

She laughed, a wet, rasping sound. "You are insane. You have no leverage. When the Hive reboots, I will...."

"You'll be dead if I pull this trigger." He raised the mech's primary plasma cannon. "And you know I won't. Because I'm a diplomat. I don't kill. I persuade."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want you to admit something. Just between us. The war—it was never about territory, was it? It was about fear. You were afraid of us. Our unpredictability. Our stubborn refusal to fit into your Hive's neat categories."

The Priestess was silent.

"And we were afraid of you," Vahn continued. "Your unity. Your discipline. The way you never argue about what movie to watch."

"We do not watch movies."

"My point exactly. We're different. But different doesn't have to mean dead. It can mean... complementary. You bring order. We bring chaos. Together, we might build something neither of us could alone."

The Hive Mind's reboot timer hit ten seconds.

The Priestess looked up at him. For the first time, her eyes held something other than contempt.

"You would trust us?"

"I would negotiate with you. Which is the closest thing to trust that intelligent species ever achieve."

Five seconds.

"And your soul?"

"I'll keep it, thanks. But I'll give you something better."

Zero.

The Hive Mind roared back online. The Priestess blinked, shook her head, and stood up.

She extended one clawed hand.

"The treaty. Your terms."

Vahn shook it gently. The mech's grip sensors registered the pressure.

"My terms, peace. Trade. Cultural exchange. You teach us how to be less stupid. We teach you how to enjoy martinis."

"Agreed. But I want the recipe for that rodent dish you mentioned."

"You've got a deal."

****

The treaty was signed three hours later. Vahn's mech used a stylus the size of a small tree. His signature looked like a seismograph reading.

Commander Yuen stood at the base of the mech, arms crossed, trying very hard not to smile.

"You know they're going to keep you in that thing," she said. "The Council wants a permanent ambassador. And you're... uniquely suited."

Vahn looked down at his massive metal hands. At the scorched plain. At the platform above, where lights now blinked in a friendly pattern instead of a threatening one.

"I suppose there are worse fates," he said. "I'll need a bigger desk."

"And a smaller ego."

"That ship has sailed. Also, I can't feel my legs. Mostly because I don't have any."

Yuen laughed, a real laugh, the first he'd heard from her since before he died.

"Welcome back, Eli."

"It's good to be back. Now..." He pointed one massive cannon toward the horizon. "...about that martini. Do you think the Xyloxi make a decent vermouth?"

Behind him, the Priestess's voice crackled over the comms, "we do not. But we have a fermented nectar that will, in your parlance, 'knock your socks off.' Assuming you have socks. Which you do not."

Vahn sighed. The mech's coolant pumps cycled contentedly.

"Gentlebeings," he said. "We have a long way to go. But for the first time in sixty years, we're walking in the same direction."

He took a step forward. The earth shook. And somewhere in the depths of the war machine's titanium heart, a dead diplomat smiled.

THE END

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ONE SIGNATURE, ONE LIMB.
NO REGENERATION. NO SECOND CHANCE.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

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